

WEEK FOUR: PEER ASSESSMENTS

Peer assessments offer valuable opportunities for students to engage in the assessment process. Not only do students receive extra feedback from other listeners/readers, but they also get a chance to observe, comment on, and learn from the language abilities of their classmates. In this week's Teacher's Corner, we examine the value of peer assessments in the English language classroom and offer several ways for teachers to use peer assessments in the classroom regardless of content or skill.

RATIONALE OF PEER ASSESSMENTS

Teachers and students sometimes hesitate to fully embrace peer assessments. Some teachers feel as if they are the only ones qualified to give feedback and assess learning, and many students tend to agree. Additionally, students often feel unable or unwilling to give feedback that is useful or relevant. As a result, both teachers and students might shy away from peer assessments, losing a critical opportunity for language development. We need to remember that peer assessment and feedback engages learners in two learning strategies that are vital in the language classroom: cooperative and collaborative learning. In both of these strategies, students work together to complete activities, navigate tasks, and negotiate meaning. By emphasizing cooperative and collaborative learning activities, the teacher gives students a stake in their own learning. By creating cooperative and collaborative opportunities in assessment, students work together to find correct answers and give equally valid feedback on language skills.

In order for peer assessments to be successful, teachers need to offer clear expectations for tasks and assessments, train students in the process, explain the importance of peer feedback, and emphasize the value of students' abilities to contribute to their classmate's language development. All of this takes some planning on the part of the teacher, but once students are trained, they can take greater control of their own learning.

PEER ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS

For teacher-designed peer assessments, the teacher creates the assessment form, process, and instructions for students to use during a peer assessment activity. Reviewing the material and modeling the assessment process can go a long way in achieving success. One example of a teacher-designed peer assessment is writing task peer evaluations. The teacher-designed writing task peer evaluation shown below is a standard, highly-guided peer evaluation form that one might see used for a research paper.

[insert sample here]

In this example, students first answer very specific questions about their classmate's essay. Then, they complete an outline via a template, which gives them more freedom to interpret the essay. By providing a structured peer assessment, the teacher is able to guide students through the peer assessment process. The teacher encourages and utilizes the knowledge students have learned in class and gives them a chance to apply their knowledge to a classmate's work. The teacher also limits what learners evaluate, which helps them focus on assessment of skills that are within their range of abilities. In this sense, learners are not taxed with responsibilities beyond their abilities nor are they overwhelmed by tasks.

For the second part of this peer assessment, students outline the essay of their classmate using an essay outline template that they have used in preparing their own essays. By writing an outline, the learners interpret what they read and paraphrase it for their classmates. This valuable feedback helps the writer know what they need to revise and helps readers understand what makes for strong, clear writing. In addition, peer assessments, particularly in writing, remind learners that their reading audience is much larger than just a single teacher, and gives learners an opportunity to utilize their reading skills to support their classmates' writing skills.

Another form of peer assessment includes involving the learners in the development of the assessment. Depending on the task that needs assessment, teachers ask students to develop the evaluation guidelines for the peer assessment. The students can handle this task as long as the assignment or tasks objectives are clearly explained. In this type of peer assessment, learners work in groups and generate a checklist of the information/content that they want to evaluate. This list can be negotiated as a larger group or can be used to meet the more specific needs of each pair of students. This means that each pair of learners will have slight differences in their checklists according to their own needs and expectations; however, since the assessment is rooted in a clearly defined assignment, most checklists should be similar. The checklists can then be used as a framework for a related assessment. Let's look at a more specific example of turning a checklist into a peer assessment.

Leading a discussion in class is a great task to help students learn about the elements of facilitating successful discussions. Students are each asked to find a prompt for the discussion they will lead (the prompt could be a short essay or article, a video, a thoughtful question, or a quote depending on the length and purpose of the discussion). Learners are then grouped into small groups (between 4 to 6 students) and each learner takes a turn in leading and facilitating a discussion based on his or her own prompts. Before the discussions begin, the teacher and learners can work together to come up with a checklist of what is involved in a well-facilitated discussion. The learners can use the checklist as a guide for planning their own discussions and the teacher can use the checklist to plan a peer assessment. Each learner will then evaluate their classmates on their discussion-leading skills using a simple rubric rooted in the student-created checklist.

Discussion Activity Feedback (1 is the lowest and 5 is the highest)

Discussion leader introduced the topic clearly.	1 2 3 4 5
Discussion leader involved all participants in the discussion.	1 2 3 4 5
Discussion leader asked follow-up questions and clarified comments of participants.	1 2 3 4 5
Discussion leader asked relevant questions during the discussion.	1 2 3 4 5
Discussion leader concluded the discussion with a summary of the main ideas presented and discussed.	1 2 3 4 5
Comments _____ _____	Total Score _____/25

Learners can complete these feedback forms anonymously or with their names on them depending on what the teacher/students choose. Anonymous peer assessments in tasks like this can generate more honest, realistic feedback; however, if learners are in a classroom with a strong community, peer assessments can work well without anonymity. Finally, encouraging comments can be an added benefit for all students. Sometimes, free comments are too difficult, so this task can be modified by asking students to identify something the discussion leader does well and something that needs improvement.

Comments Two things discussion leader did well: 1. _____ 2. _____ One thing discussion leader can improve: 1. _____

Peer assessments can provide valuable feedback to students. When peer assessment is guided and learners are trained, the results can be transformative in terms of how well learners are able to work together and recognize the progression of their language learning. At the same time, learners feel more confident when they are given a chance to share their opinions and feedback with their classmates.

References

Brown, H. D. (2004). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.

American English Resources

- [Teacher's Corner: Collecting and Using Data](#)
- [American English Webinar: Teaching Today's Learners: Oral Error Correction and Writing Effective Assessments](#)
- [Assessment of Young Learners](#)
- [Assessment Literacy: Building a Base for Better Teaching and Learning](#)